

'US prepared to win war'

Britain to send 20,000 troops, Iraq lines up 100,000 human shields

REUTERS, Fort Hood

President Bush said on Friday the United States was ready to win a potential war with Iraq and "liberate" its people as he rallied soldiers at the largest US Army base amid an intensifying military buildup around the Gulf nation.

"Some crucial hours may lie ahead," Bush, wearing a green military jacket, told about 4,000 troops at Fort Hood Army Base in his home state of Texas. "We are ready. We're prepared."

"If force becomes necessary to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction ... to secure our country and to keep the peace, America will act deliberately, America will act decisively, and America will prevail because we've got the finest military in the world," he said. His speech was punctuated with applause, whistles and the soldiers' traditional "hoo-ah" cheers of approval.

Bush accused Iraqi President Saddam Hussein of being a real threat to the United States and its allies because he had used weapons of mass destruction in the past - including against his own people.

"Should Saddam seal his fate by refusing to disarm, by ignoring the opinion of the world, you'll be fighting not to conquer anybody but to liberate people," Bush told the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd in a base gymnasium as soldiers and their

relatives waved stars-and-stripes.

Bush said he hoped to avoid war but that Saddam had chosen to defy United Nations' disarmament demands by failing to provide a credible account of his nuclear, biological and chemical weapon programs to arms inspectors.

Iraq denies it has such programs, says it is complying with UN resolutions that stem back to the 1991 Gulf War and claims Bush will launch a war to seize its oil wealth no matter what inspectors conclude.

Bush addressed the troops after defence officials said the Pentagon had ordered units of the 45,000-member US 1st Marine Expeditionary Force to deploy from California to join thousands of other troops preparing for a possible war.

Nearly 60,000 US military personnel are in the Gulf and that number could double in the coming weeks following a New Year's surge in the movement of troops, warplanes and ships to the Gulf region.

The president flew to the base by helicopter, landing in a setting that provided images of the military's preparations to underscore his war rhetoric.

Flanking his landing area were sand-coloured tanks, a black Apache attack helicopter, a missile launch vehicle and Bradley fighting vehicles. Some of the soldiers greeting him were dressed

in camouflage and sporting green-painted faces as they stood near artillery inscribed with nicknames such as "Cold Steel."

Another report says Britain is to send more than 20,000 troops to the Gulf and mobilise 7,000 reservists next week in preparation for war against Iraq, The Daily Telegraph said Saturday.

It said defence chiefs will brief Prime Minister Tony Blair on his return from holiday about plans for a mass deployment led by the aircraft carrier Ark Royal. Blair is then expected to announce the deployment in a statement to parliament.

AFP adds: Iraq is preparing to take in thousands of people from across the world who have offered to be used as "human shields" against a US-led war, an official newspaper reported Saturday.

Al-Qadisiyah quoted former Jordanian MP Mansur Murad, who has been campaigning for volunteers, as saying some 100,000 people had already come forward.

However, the daily gave no dates for the arrival of the volunteers, nor their exact numbers.

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said Thursday the regime backed the human shield volunteers.

'Taliban have chemical weapons'

AFP, Peshawar

Taliban fugitives, on the run from US troops in Afghanistan for the past 15 months, have obtained chemical weapons, a former diplomat for the hardline Islamic militia has claimed.

"Chemical weapons are in the possession of the Taliban and will be used at a suitable time," Naseer Ahmed Rohi told a small group of journalists in Peshawar, some 30 km from the Afghan frontier, late Friday.

"Friendly states have provided these weapons," he added, without naming any countries.

Security officials in Islamabad, declining to be identified, were sceptical of Rohi's claim.

Rohi served in the Taliban's embassy in the United Arab Emirates - one of only three states to diplomatically recognise the militia - during its 1996 to 2001 rule of Afghanistan.

He has frequently held clandestine press conferences in Peshawar, ordering journalists not to disclose the venues.



A motorist passes a burning jeep on Saturday set ablaze by mobs in Patna. Violent mobs set fire to a car as protests continued over the alleged illegal killing of three youths by police.

Powell, Sinha exchange views on Iraq, N Korea

AFP, New Delhi

US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha discussed a range of issues including Iraq and the North Korean crisis by telephone, officials said Saturday.

In the call Friday, the two also discussed the imminent visit to India of Richard Haas, director of the Department of Policy and Planning in the US administration, who is due to hold talks in New Delhi on Monday.

"It was an intense conversation that lasted for 15-20 minutes. He (Powell) reviewed bilateral relations. The other issues that were discussed included North Korea and developments related to Iraq," Navtej Sarma, spokesman of the ministry of external affairs, told reporters.

Musharraf denies nuke threat to India

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf was referring to guerrilla tactics, not nuclear weapons, when he said Pakistan was ready to use unconventional warfare against India last year, state media reported Saturday.

In a speech to army troops on December 30, General Musharraf revealed that he had warned nuclear-rival India "they should not expect a conventional war from Pakistan" if Indian troops entered Pakistan during last year's tense 10-month military standoff.

The comment was interpreted by some observers as a reference to nuclear weapons, although Musharraf did not mention nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.

Singaporean patrol ship collide with cargo vessel

AFP, Singapore

One Singaporean female naval officer is dead and there are fears over the fate of three of her colleagues after their anti-submarine ship collided with a merchant vessel, Defence Minister Tony Tan said Saturday.

Navy divers found the woman's body at the back of the RSS Courageous after it collided with the Dutch-registered container vessel ANL Indonesia before midnight on Friday in the Singapore Straits, Tan said.

All four women were trapped in the sleeping quarters at the back of the ship, which flooded after the collision.

Kashmir govt sets up helpline in Delhi

AFP, Srinagar

The government of Indian-administered Kashmir has set-up a helpline in New Delhi to help Kashmiris who face police harassment there, officials said Saturday.

Thousands of Kashmiris work and study in New Delhi, and many have complained of police harassment since the eruption of armed anti-Indian rebellion in the strife-torn province in 1989. A spokesman for Kashmir's government said it was setting up the helpline in order to assist verification of the identities of Kashmiris working in Delhi.

ROK briefs US official on compromise nuke deal

Washington rules out Pyongyang's proposal

AFP, AP, Seoul

South Korean and United States officials held talks here Saturday over a compromise deal being prepared by Seoul in a bid to end the stand-off over North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, a report said.

Assistant Foreign Minister Lee Tae-Shik held talks with the deputy US ambassador Evans Revere after a meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) to discuss the possible compromise solution, the local MBC television network reported.

Lee returned to Seoul from Beijing on Friday where he obtained a pledge from Chinese counterparts to help resolve the crisis "peacefully through dialogue".

It is thought that Lee would have used the meeting to convey China's position on the stand-off.

Aides to South Korean president-elect Roh Moo-Hyun revealed Friday that he was preparing a compromise deal which he hopes can bring an end to the standoff between Washington and Pyongyang, sparked by the Stalinist regime's decision to reactivate a

nuclear complex which had been mothballed since a 1994 agreement with the United States.

Roh formally takes over as president in February but his transitional team is working closely with the outgoing government of his political mentor President Kim Dae-Jung.

The NSC meeting, chaired by the South's Unification Minister, Jeong Se-Hyun, was convened to hammer out the government's position ahead of talks with the United States and Japan in Washington early next week on policy towards North Korea.

AP adds: The Bush administration on Friday ruled out striking a bargain with North Korea to freeze its nuclear weapons program or offering any other incentive to end the threat.

North Korea agreed in 1994 to suspend the program and "we are not willing to bargain or negotiate over commitments that have been made before," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

As South Korea suggested compromise and North Korea

revived its demand for a non-aggression treaty with the United States, Boucher said, "We are looking for North Korea to visibly and verifiably dismantle its nuclear programs."

He said North Korea already knows "we have no intent to invade the North."

Portraying the United States and South Korea and other allies as in accord, the spokesman said "North Korea must understand ... that its actions are a challenge to all responsible nations."

In 1994, the Clinton administration reached an agreement with North Korea to freeze its nuclear weapons program in exchange for energy supplies and a civilian-style reactor. South Korea and Japan joined in carrying out the accord.

One idea under consideration in South Korea, the Yonhap news agency reported, is exchanging North Korea's abandonment of the nuclear program for a written guarantee of security from the United States.

9 Pak N-scientists leave country secretly

AFP, Islamabad

Nine disgruntled Pakistani nuclear scientists have left Pakistan for foreign countries since 1997 and more may follow because of poor pay and long hours, a leaked internal memo published Saturday warned.

The South Asia Tribune news website carried a memo from employees at a Pakistani nuclear power plant warning that many of its 250 nuclear scientists and engineers were "planning to run from the country because they were not getting a fair deal in Pakistan."

It said eight senior engineers and one assistant engineer from the Chashma nuclear power plant (Chasnupp) in central Pakistan had departed - one in 1997, six in 2000 and two in 2002 - due to "inhuman behaviour of Chasnupp management."

They constituted a "brain drain to Canada/USA/Australia," the memo, said but gave no firm information as to which countries the scientists had moved.

The memo accused the plant's management of "humiliating behaviour" and listed grievances including requirements that the scientists work 11 hours a day, seven days a week. Emergency duties can push

working week up to 90 hours, it said.

"Due to these extra abnormal working hours the safety of the plant is in dangerous condition," it said, stating that Chasnupp and IAEA regulations limited weekly hours to 40.

The website said that among the eight senior engineers listed as leaving Pakistan were several who had at least two years of training from China and were highly qualified to run the power plant.

Pakistan's nuclear program has been under the spotlight in recent months following several reports that Islamabad and Pakistani nuclear experts had been assisting North Korea develop nuclear weapons.

Islamabad has denied the claims. A Japanese news agency reported in December that Pakistan had informed the United States that a number of its scientists and military officers were "personally" involved in providing nuclear arms technology to the hardline communist state two years ago.

But the Pakistani government, in its report to Washington, said it was not involved in the transfer and attributed it to "personal" links, the Jiji Press news agency said.

Chavez mulls martial law: 2 killed

AP, Caracas

President Hugo Chavez said he would consider imposing martial law to quell Venezuela's internal crisis after two people died and dozens more were wounded during a march aimed at ousting him.

Gunfire erupted Friday during an opposition march on the headquarters of the armed forces, Caracas Fire Chief Rodolfo Briceno said. Two people died of gunshot wounds and at least 78 others were injured - five of them by gunshots.

It was unclear who fired on the demonstrators, who faced hundreds of Chavez supporters throwing rocks and bottles at security forces trying to keep the two sides apart.

"I am obligated to protect the people. I am obligated to protect public order," Chavez said. "If they force me to (decree martial law), I'd have to do it."

But, he added, "So far, despite everything that has happened, there has been no need to apply any exceptional measures."

No cross-border operations into Pakistan so far: US

AFP, Bagram Air Base

The US military said Saturday it has refrained from cross-border operations from Afghanistan into war-torn ally Pakistan, despite stating recently it could chase hostile forces into Pakistan if needed.

"We actually haven't crossed the border in pursuit of enemy forces," Major Steve Clutter told reporters at Bagram, headquarters of the US-led coalition in Afghanistan to root out fugitives of the al-Qaeda terror network and the hardline Taliban regime which harboured them.

The military has sought to clarify a December 29 incident in which it states a US soldier was wounded when troops came under fire from a Pakistani border guard who they say was inside Afghan territory.

A US warplane dropped a 500-pound bomb at an empty religious school where the assailant took shelter. The school lies on the Pakistani side of a Pakistani border

Bihar protests go on Modi, Thakur hurt, 5000 detained during clash

AFP, Patna

Violent mobs set fire to a car as protests continued Saturday in the east Indian state of Bihar over the alleged illegal killing of three youths by police, officials said.

Rioting and arson started early morning in the troubled state capital Patna when a group of young men torched a car in front of a police picket.

"The youths drove the car on the main Bailey Road street of the state capital at 10 am (0430 GMT) and hit a motorcycle. They then got off and torched the car," a police official said.

The officer said the car was probably stolen by the men before being driven to the spot and set ablaze. The incident took place barely a few hundred metres from the chief minister's residence.

PTI adds: Opposition activists fought pitched battles with police here as large scale violence and arrest of more than 5,000 protestors marred the opposition-sponsored Bihar bandh which paralysed normal life across the state on Friday.

Leader of the Opposition Sushil Kumar Modi of BJP and former Union minister CP Thakur were

among scores of opposition leaders and protestors injured in police action when they were leading a procession to enforce the bandh called to protest the killing of three youths here on Sunday in fake police encounter. Modi suffered minor head injuries.

Over 5000 bandh supporters across the state were taken into custody, official sources here said.

The centre of violence was Ashiana Nagar locality, where the youths were gunned down, with bandh supporters locked in running battles on the streets with police which opened fire in the air and lobbed teargas shells to disperse the protestors.

Scores of policemen and agitators were injured in the skirmishes. Mediapersons were also targeted by lathi-wielding hordes who smashed the windscreen of the car of a television news channel.

The police opened fire at Ashiana Nagar after a warning by Special Superintendent of Police Sunil Kumar over the public address system failed to dissuade rioters from ransacking markets, official sources said.



A member of Venezuela's political police (Disip) patrols an area where gunmen fired on pro-Chavez demonstrators, in Caracas on Friday. Police opened fire on demonstrators and at least two people were killed and several others injured, as supporters and foes of Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez exchanged gunshots.

US plans visitor tracking rules

AP, Washington

The government wants detailed information about every person who comes to or leaves the country by commercial plane or boat, and for the first time will require US citizens to fill out forms detailing their comings and goings.

Under rules proposed Friday, the information would be sent electronically to the government for matching against security databases.

"It's another way to enhance security for travellers," Immigration and Naturalisation Service spokeswoman Kimberly Weismann said.

The public will have a month to comment on the plan and the final regulations will take effect later this year. The American Civil Liberties Union, which has criticised many of the administration's anti-terrorism information-gathering efforts, said these rules should not impinge on people's privacy.

"We don't see a huge downside," said spokeswoman Emily Whitfield. Congress mandated the changes in legislation that was signed into law by President Bush last May. The law also tightened rules governing the issuance of

visas to visitors and students coming to the United States and added more Border Patrol officers.

The proposal requires all passengers arriving or departing, as well as crew members, to provide this information: name, date of birth, citizenship, sex, passport number and country of issuance, country of residence, US visa number and other details of its issuance, address while in the United States, and, where it applies, alien registration number.

Not all information is required in every case. For example, a Canadian person would not need to provide passport information because one isn't required for a visit to the United States.

All commercial airlines, cargo flights, cruise ships and other vessels carrying crew or passengers will be affected, with the exception of most ferry boats. Private transportation is not affected, nor are commercial buses or trains.

The information will be sent electronically to the government before a traveller arrives in the United States or departs from it, giving officials a complete passenger and crew manifest.

The law also gives Attorney

General John Ashcroft leeway in proposing further requirements.

The aim is to detect potential terrorists or criminals immediately and to enhance the government's ability to track whether visitors to the United States have departed as planned.

The INS is weighing how long it will keep the information.

For years, international travellers have been required to fill out forms detailing their arrival and departure from countries around the world. Before the Sept. 11 attacks, the main goal was to speed travellers through customs.

The US government, however, has not previously required its own citizens to submit such forms, and never required forms from departing travellers. Canadians, permanent resident aliens and certain other people also were exempted.

More than 29 million passengers flew to the United States from overseas in the first nine months of 2002, according to the Commerce Department. The cruise industry estimates that about 8 million US passengers will embark in 2003.

Floods wreak havoc across Europe

REUTERS, Berlin

Hurricane force winds and torrential rains battered Europe on Friday, killing at least six people, flooding tens of thousands of homes and hampering rail, road and waterway traffic.

Winds of nearly 125 mph and flooding caused chaos in Germany, France, Britain, Portugal, Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic with barge traffic halted on key rivers and toppled trees blocking roads and rail lines.

There were also widespread power outages from the storms, which refocused attention on the odd weather in Europe this winter that has left parts of the Alps without snow because of unseasonably warm temperatures while leaving northern Europe shivering from a cold snap not experienced for decades.

Belgium, swamped by the worst floods in a nearly a decade, put its army on flood alert as many parts of the country came under almost a meter (three feet) of water.



A worker installs a water-barrier on the riverside walk of river Rhine in Cologne, Germany on Friday. Incessant rain has swelled watercourses in Bavaria and Cologne.